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SOVIET LEADERSHIP VIEWS OF THE PERSHING THREAT

Summary

Key Soviet Defense Council members probably hold private views of the Pershing II threat that differ, at least in priority, from those presented in the USSR's propaganda campaign against the INF.

The Soviet leadership probably sees the challenge posed by the Pershing II as primarily geopolitical—part of a broader US effort to upset the strategic balance of power and coerce Soviet global behavior. Their statements indicate they consider that:

— The Pershing II is part of a broader US strategic plan to acquire forces to fight a limited nuclear war in the European theater.

— Pershing II is "destabilizing" because it can strike critical strategic targets—particularly the Soviet command and control system—in the western USSR, reducing confidence in Moscow's launch-on-tactical-warning option.

— Pershing II, in conjunction with a coordinated massive US ICBM launch, poses the threat of a sudden disabling first strike against Soviet strategic forces.

The hierarchy of propaganda charges reflects these leadership concerns in reverse order of priority.

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This memorandum was prepared by [   ] of the Current Support Division, [   ] of Strategic Forces Division, and [   ] of Policy Analysis Division of the Office of Soviet Analysis. Comments and questions should be addressed to the Chief, Current Support Division, Office of Soviet Analysis on [   ]

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Capabilities and Roles

The Soviets have contended in technical journals that the Pershing II is a "totally new system," and not a modernized version of its precursor, the Pershing IA. They allege that the Pershing II has:

-- New design and test-launch equipment.

-- Enhancements, such as an automated topographical survey and targeting system, and a substantially new warhead outfitted with a terminal guidance system.

-- A 2,500 km range, "three times" that of the Pershing IA.

-- A flight-time that would reduce Soviet warning of a US ballistic missile attack from "20 to 4 (or 6) minutes."

We assume that Soviet military analysts know the planned range (1,800 km) and deployment (central West Germany) area and conclude that the 108 missiles could target:

-- Forty ICBM launch control facilities for 400 ICBMs--almost 30 percent of the force;

-- One over-the-horizon radar oriented toward detecting launches from US ICBM fields and four ballistic missile early warning radars;

-- Numerous headquarters, command posts, communications facilities, and bases for Soviet Strategic Aviation, SRF, Navy, and Air Defense Forces, plus several national-level nuclear weapons stockpile sites.

If the Soviets assume a 2,500 km range for the Pershing II, other facilities could also be targeted, including National Leadership, General Staff, and SRF headquarters and command and control facilities around Moscow, 27 additional ICBM launch control facilities, and numerous other important targets. Many of these installations--particularly those near Moscow--would also be within the 1,800 km range if Pershing IIs were deployed to the northeast near Hamburg, West Germany.

We believe that the potential vulnerability of their command, control, and warning facilities in the western USSR would reduce the confidence of Soviet military analysts in their launch-on-tactical-warning response to a US ballistic missile attack. This, in turn, would probably diminish their confidence that they would have time to identify the origin of incoming missiles and launch an appropriate response without unnecessarily escalating the conflict to intercontinental warfare. Soviet military analysts probably consider that even if a surprise Pershing attack slowed their response, they would have sufficient redundant and mobile command and control and force survivability to launch a credible retaliatory strike after sustaining a US ICBM attack.

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Assumed US Intentions

Soviet political leaders have consistently emphasized the geopolitical requirements that they believe drive all US strategic planning. They claim that the US strategic "intention" in deploying Pershing IIs and GLCMs in Europe is to pose a "gray area" threat to Soviet intercontinental-range nuclear systems. They allege that these systems are already offset, under the SALT agreement, by similar US-based systems, and that Washington is, thus, attempting to achieve strategic superiority through the "back door." Soviet leaders have said that all postwar US Administrations have viewed US strategic superiority as the key to offsetting Soviet advantages in conventional forces along the USSR's periphery.

Soviet leaders have reasserted their contention that the current US Administration continues to strive for strategic superiority in order to:

— Escape from the constraints imposed by East-West strategic parity on US foreign policy generally; and specifically,

— Reinvigorate the credibility of the longstanding US threat to use strategic nuclear power so as to "deter" Soviet or proxy adventures in Third World.

Nevertheless, Soviet leaders reassure domestic audiences that, although the US continues its efforts to regain strategic superiority, the Soviet strategic nuclear deterrent now virtually prevents the US from using its strategic weapons against the USSR. They see Pershing II as increasing the threat to their strategic forces, but Soviet leaders have stated that the US is deterred from attempting a disarming first strike—even with Pershing II—by the Soviets' modern missile detection systems and strategic forces readiness.

Soviet Propaganda Against INF

The Soviet propaganda effort to prevent Pershing II deployment has followed three general themes over time.

-- The propaganda now asserts that Pershing IIs would be "destabilizing"—reducing warning time of such an attack, and forcing the Soviets to further compress and automate warning, decisionmaking, and launching procedures. The Soviets maintain that implicitly this tightening of the trigger finger increases the chances of an accidental nuclear war.

-- Recent propaganda strives to make it appear that the Pershing capabilities signal an "intention" to launch a sudden, disabling strategic nuclear strike.

-- For the first year or so after the NATO decision to deploy, the Soviets contended that the weapon was part of a broad US strategic plan to acquire the type of forces that would enable it to limit a nuclear war to the European theater.

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The limited war theme, as propagandized by Moscow, has been replaced over the past couple of years by a firm warning that any Pershing II that landed on Soviet soil would be considered to have been launched from the US itself, and that the USSR would not lend credence to the US belief in the possibility of limiting nuclear conflict to a specific geographic region. Current Soviet propaganda is focused on the "disabling first strike" and "destabilization" themes. The "destabilization" argument has been relatively successful--it is more plausible, and its technical details can be confirmed by Western intelligence analyses.

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Conclusions

The Soviets probably consider that the geopolitical threat posed by the Pershing II derives from a combination of its potential military roles. They are particularly concerned that the limited war-fighting potential of the Pershing II might encourage US leaders to believe they could fight a theater nuclear war--involving strikes on Soviet territory--but still limited to Europe.

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Soviet political leaders probably do not believe that a Pershing II attack on their ICBM forces would prevent them from retaliating after absorbing a US first strike. They probably do believe, however, that Pershing II could severely degrade their launch-on-tactical-warning capabilities. Without a viable launch-on-tactical-warning option, the Soviets would fear that they could not effectively guarantee an appropriately tailored retaliatory strike if subjected to a surprise US attack once a war began in Europe.

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The propaganda decries the Pershing II most for its alleged "first disarming strike" role when used in conjunction with a coordinated massive US ICBM launch against Soviet strategic forces. Military planners must prudently consider this possibility, but the leadership almost certainly recognizes this as "worst-case" and the least likely scenario.

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